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Monitoring Of CIA Is Stepped Up

Senate Move Includes Covert-Activity Audit

By Charles R. Babcock
Washington Post Staff Writer

As a result of the Iran-contra affair, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has increased its monitoring of CIA covert action programs and will be conducting for the first time spot financial audits of secret intelligence operations.

Committee Chairman David L. Boren (D-Okla.) said the committee has stepped up its activities by conducting quarterly, rather than semiannual, reviews of covert actions. In addition, specially designated staff members will conduct monthly reviews of ongoing programs. Until now, such access, while authorized, was not routine.

He also said that William H. Webster, nominee for director of central intelligence, Robert M. Gates, the acting director, and Frank C. Carlucci, the national security adviser, have agreed to accept the committee's proposal for a new independent financial audit capability.

Boren said in an interview that he and committee Vice Chairman William S. Cohen (R-Maine) believe that the more vigorous steps are needed in light of evidence that Congress was not told about CIA involvement in the secret network set up by National Security Council (NSC) staff members to aid the Nicaraguan rebels. "Clearly, oversight needs to be improved," Boren said.

Historically, the Central Intelligence Agency has rejected the idea of outside financial audits. Earlier this month, for example, two members of Congress pressed for the General Accounting Office (GAO) to audit CIA methods for controlling delivery of Stinger antiaircraft missiles to U.S.-backed rebels in Afghanistan and Angola.

The CIA resisted that and an earlier move to allow the GAO to audit the possible diversion of funds from covert accounts supporting the Afghan resistance. Its officials have said the agency is accountable only to Congress' intelligence committees.

Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.), who was chairman of the Senate committee in 1985 and 1986, said Friday that he did not think the new steps will improve congressional oversight of the CIA. "That's not what oversight is all about," he said. "The purpose is to help intelligence, not to have an audit team sitting on the back of the [CIA] operations department."

Boren said, "We're not going to have hundreds of auditors. The idea is to have two or three auditors on the staff with the capability to swoop down unannounced to spot-check accounts in the covert action field. It's more of a deterrent."

In letters March 26 to Gates and Carlucci raising the financial audit idea, Boren and Cohen said "recent events have highlighted one particular area of concern" for congressional oversight. "That is the need for an independent auditing capability with respect to covert action programs."

The intelligence community has been cooperative over the years in providing information "about the funding and operation of covert activities," they wrote. But the committee "must depend solely" on the agencies to supply the information. "This situation, at best, leaves doubts in the minds of many as to the capacity of the committee to fully and independently perform its oversight function."

Gates and Carlucci replied last month in separate letters that the senators' proposal was "a promising approach" and agreed to work with the committee on details.

Boren noted that the committee also is requiring that all presidential "findings" approving covert actions and all significant changes be made in writing. President Reagan's approval of the first arms shipments to Iran was done orally and Congress was not notified, as required by the Intelligence Oversight Act, until the deals were exposed publicly.

Members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence also have moved to tighten procedures following the Iran-contra affair. Several members of the committee have introduced a bill requiring that the president give prior notification of covert actions and not delay notice more than 48 hours in even the most sensitive cases.

Boren said that the committee is also tightening its security procedures so White House officials will not be able to cite congressional "leaks" of classified information as a reason not to share secrets.

He said that he and Cohen, with the approval of Senate Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.) and Senate Minority Leader Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.), have announced to the committee that any staff member caught leaking information will be fired immediately while any senator caught taking such action will be forced to resign from the panel.

Boren said he would not ask senators suspected of information leaks to take a polygraph test. "But there are ways," he added.

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